Southern Connecticut State University | Department of Communication, Media & Screen Studies

CMS 250: READING FILM: FORM, GENRE, CULTURE
(THE AMERICAN HORROR FILM)
HYBRID COURSE

Fall 2026
Buley Library (BU) 202 • Tuesday: 1:50 pm – 3:05 pm

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Office Location: Engleman (EN) B019

Office Hours:
Tuesday 10:00 am – 11:00 am
Wednesday: 1:30 pm – 3:30 pm (Virtual)
Thursday: 1:00 pm – 3:00 pm
Or by appointment

Course Description

This course explores the evolution, themes, and cultural significance of the American horror film from its early 20th-century roots to the present day. Through weekly screenings, discussions, and critical analysis, students will examine how horror films reflect and shape societal fears, anxieties, and cultural values. We will investigate major horror subgenres, including, slasher, supernatural, psychological horror, and found footage, among others, while tracing their development across key historical periods such as the Great Depression, the Cold War, the post-9/11 era, and the contemporary moment. Particular attention will be paid to how horror films engage with issues of gender, race, class, sexuality, religion, and the family. Students will learn to analyze visual and narrative elements of film, as well as apply critical frameworks to understand the genre's deeper meanings and impact. The course emphasizes horror as a culturally responsive and aesthetically rich mode of filmmaking that continues to evolve with changing social conditions and technological innovations. By the end of the semester, students will not only have a deeper appreciation of the horror genre but also the analytical tools to decode how fear operates in film, and in American culture more broadly.

Course Learning Outcomes

The course seeks to help students achieve the following learning outcomes:

- Identify and distinguish major subgenres within American horror film, including slasher, supernatural, psychological, and found footage etc., and trace their development across key historical and cultural periods.
- Analyze the ways in which horror films reflect and respond to American societal fears, including anxieties related to race, gender, class, sexuality, religion, and the family.
- Apply foundational film analysis techniques, including the study of mise-en-scène, cinematography, sound, editing, and narrative structure, to interpret the aesthetic and thematic components of horror films.

- Evaluate the cultural and historical significance of horror films by situating them within broader political, technological, and ideological contexts.
- Critically engage with scholarly and popular discourse about horror, using appropriate terminology and theoretical frameworks to articulate informed perspectives on the horror film genre.
- Demonstrate creative and critical thinking through the development and presentation of an original horror film concept that reflects an understanding of genre conventions and contemporary cultural relevance.

Course Format

CMS 250: Reading Film: Form, Genre, Culture (The American Horror Film) is a hybrid course, which requires students to complete a portion of the required contact hours traditionally by attending class on campus while engaging in the remaining portion of the course online, completing various screenings, activities, and assignments. We will meet in person on Tuesday afternoons only, with out of class activities assigned throughout the remainder of the week until we meet again in person. You will use your Blackboard account to login to the course from the SCSU login page, where the syllabus will list assignment instructions, grading rubrics, quiz reviews and important due dates. Hybrid courses seemingly require more discipline than traditional courses, and you will be responsible for completing all of the required assignments and activities in a timely manner, paying close attention to the posted due dates for each assignment. *This course requires you to meet specific deadlines and should be completed by deadlines listed in the syllabus*. Students <u>will not</u> be permitted to complete all assignments in bulk toward the end of the semester (see "Late Policy" below).

LEP Explorations Course

This course fulfills the Explorations category, Interpreting Culture(s), of our general education requirements, the Liberal Education Program. The purpose of the Interpreting Culture(s) category is to examine and develop an understanding of cultural practices, architecture, art, artifacts, texts, values, and/or traditions.

The main objectives of this category are:

1. Student identifies cultural practices, spaces, architecture, art, artifacts, texts, values, and/or traditions in their historical or contemporary context.

2. Student demonstrates techniques to think critically about cultural practices, spaces, architecture, art, artifacts, texts, values, and/or traditions and their impact on our understanding of the past and present.

In addition to covering these objectives, this course will also reemphasize at least three Foundation competencies: Critical Thinking, Written Communication, and Creative Thinking.

Access to Films

Most of the assigned films for this course are available through major streaming platforms. While some may be included with a subscription you already have, others may require a rental fee. I will do my best to provide information on where each film can be accessed. A selection of assigned titles is also available through the Swank Digital Campus database via Buley Library. To access it, visit the Buley Library website, click on "All Databases" in the left-hand menu, and

scroll down to find Swank Digital Campus. Be sure you're logged in to your SCSU account. Once inside the Swank platform, you can search for the assigned film by title. Whenever possible, I encourage you to watch the films on the largest screen available to you to best experience their visual and auditory elements, though I understand this may not always be feasible.

Content Disclaimer
Please be advised that many of the films screened and discussed in this course may contain graphic, disturbing, and potentially upsetting content, including depictions of violence, psychological trauma, gore, and intense or controversial themes. These elements are characteristic of the horror genre and are essential to the academic and cultural analysis we will engage in throughout the course. Students are expected to approach films as primary texts, worthy of serious critical study. As with literature or historical documents that contain challenging subject matter, horror films can offer valuable insight into cultural fears, social tensions, and shifting moral landscapes. To that end, students should approach these films with an open and analytical mind.

Required Readings
There is no required text for this course. All assigned readings will be provided to you as .pdf files, which will be posted in their respective weekly content areas on Blackboard.

The Center for Academic Success and Accessibility Services (CASAS)
The Center for Academic Success and Accessibility Services (CASAS) provides comprehensive support for Southern students. CASAS houses the University's tutoring, writing support services, and Peer Academic Leaders (PALS) as well as academic coaching and programming related to your success in the academic environment.

Additionally, Southern provides reasonable accommodations in accordance with the Americans with Disabilities Act and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, for students with documented disabilities on an individualized basis. If you are a student with a documented disability, the University's Accessibility Services can work with you to determine appropriate accommodations. Before you receive accommodations in this class, you will need to make an appointment with Accessibility Services, located in Buley Library, Rm 303. To discuss your approved accommodations or other concerns, such as medical emergencies, please make an appointment to meet as soon as possible. For accommodations regarding flexibility with due dates, you must meet with me virtually within one week of receiving the accommodation letter so that we can come up with a plan for you to be successful in the course. Failure to do so will impact my ability to meet this accommodation. It is important to note that most due dates are not flexible due to the compounding nature of the work required and the scaffolding of concepts learned.

Evaluation	
Attendance/Participation	15%
Reading/Screening Quizzes	15%
Short Writing Assignments	10%
Midterm Exam	15%
Horror Film Director Profile	20%
Hollywood Horror Film Project/Pitch	25%

Attendance/Participation

From the SCSU Undergraduate Catalog:

"Regular class attendance is expected by the University and is the responsibility of the student. It is the responsibility of the student to understand the attendance policy in each course he or she takes, as outlined in each course syllabus. When absent, students remain responsible for finding out what class activities occurred during the absence and making up missed work if the instructor permits it. When a student knows in advance that it will be necessary to miss a class session, the student should inform the instructor.

When a student has missed a significant portion of coursework, which may be difficult or impossible to make up, the student should confer with the course instructor to explore options, including withdrawal or late withdrawal from the course. The student also may consult with an Academic Advisor, the Dean of Students or designee, or the Registrar's Office to consider various options.

Absences occasioned by official University activities, such as participation in conferences, intercollegiate athletic events, musical performances, and other events, must be documented in advance through the Office of the Dean of Student Affairs. A student that knows that such absences will occur shall confer with the instructor in respect to such absences.

Students may contact the Office of the Dean of Student Affairs with questions about the University's policy on class attendance."

CMS 250 Attendance/Participation Policy

Since we will only meet once per week, attendance is mandatory. Repeated absences (excused or unexcused) will directly and negatively impact your final grade. Several factors go into determining your attendance/participation grade in this course. Prompt and regular attendance for the full class period is of extreme importance. All classes start at 1:50 pm and will end at 3:05 pm. Two late arrivals (15 minutes or more) or early departures are equal to one class missed. I recognize that life can be unpredictable, so your first two absences (for any reason) will not impact your attendance/participation grade. However, after two absences, each additional absence—regardless of the reason—will result in a three-point deduction from your attendance/participation grade.

Students are expected to attend class and participate in class discussions. Simply showing up for every class period on time does not mean that you will receive a perfect attendance and participation grade. Actively contributing to the class is of paramount importance. If you miss a class, it is your responsibility to obtain notes on missed class lectures. PLEASE DO NOT EMAIL ME AND ASK, "What did I miss?" OR "Did I miss anything important?" Each class period builds upon material acquired during the previous class period; therefore, it is very important that you attend every class. Please refrain from using mobile devices (i.e., cell phones, smart phones) during class or using your laptop for purposes other than taking notes (see "Technology Use" below). Repeated abuse of technology guidelines in the classroom will have a negative impact on your attendance/participation grade as well.

Reading / Screening Quizzes

Each class will begin with a brief reading/screening quiz consisting of five multiple-choice questions designed to ensure that students are completing the assigned readings and watching the weekly films, which serve as the primary texts for the course. Class discussions and lectures assume familiarity with this material, and the quizzes help establish a shared baseline of

preparation. Questions focus on basic comprehension and recall rather than detailed analysis; a student who has watched the film and completed the reading should have no difficulty answering them. Regular quizzes also encourage consistent engagement with course material throughout the semester, which is essential to developing the critical viewing, analytical, and historical awareness central to the study of the American Horror Film. Reading/Screening Quizzes are administered at the start of class to assess preparation; quizzes missed due to late arrival or absence cannot be made up. Your lowest quiz grade will automatically be dropped at the end of the semester, providing some flexibility if you have one poor performance or miss a quiz.

Short Writing Assignments
Short Writing Assignments are brief, out-of-class writing tasks that ask students to respond to specific films, scenes, readings, or concepts covered in the course. These assignments emphasize focused analysis, reflection, and clear written communication rather than length or extensive research. Short Writing Assignments are designed to reinforce key ideas, prepare students for class discussion, and support the development of analytical skills that will be expanded upon in class.

Horror Film Director Profile
For this individual project, you will create a 4 – 5 minute video essay profiling a significant American horror film director. Your video should explore the director's contributions to the genre, key themes and stylistic trademarks in their work, and how their films reflect broader cultural or historical contexts. You may choose a classic or contemporary director, but your analysis should include specific film examples and visual material (clips, stills, etc.). This is an opportunity to demonstrate both your acquired knowledge of American horror cinema and your ability to communicate ideas creatively through multimedia.

Hollywood Horror Film Project/Pitch
In this collaborative group project, your team will develop and deliver a full pitch for an original American horror film. Drawing on the themes, tropes, and subgenres explored throughout the course, your pitch deck should include a compelling logline, story summary, key characters, visual style, and audience engagement strategy. Think like a team of filmmakers presenting to a studio: your goal is to sell your idea as a viable and culturally relevant horror film. The final presentation should be creative, cohesive, and 7–10 minutes in length, incorporating visual aids to enhance your pitch.

Technology Use
The use of smart phones, or other mobile communication devices is disruptive. In the interest of preserving an effective learning environment as well as simulating professional work behaviors in this class, the use of these mobile devices is strictly prohibited during class. You may use laptops or tablets in this class to take notes, but not for other purposes (checking social media, watching videos online, etc.). Please place your phone on "vibrate" before you come to class. If you need to monitor your cell phone because of an ongoing family emergency or health issue, please talk to me about it ahead of time so that I can accommodate you with the least disruption possible. Disregard for these technology guidelines will have a negative impact on your attendance/participation grade.

Late Policy
Assignments will be marked down one-third letter grade per day after the due date. Due

dates/times are clearly listed in the syllabus. Assignments turned in after the specified time on the day they are due are considered one day late. The ability to submit an assignment on Blackboard will disappear *three days after the due date* and will not be accepted after this date, thus resulting in a zero grade. *This course requires you to meet specific deadlines and assignments/projects should be completed by deadlines listed in the syllabus*. Students will not be permitted to complete all assignments in bulk toward the end of the semester. If you are having difficulty completing the assignments, please communicate your difficulties to me as soon as possible.

Blackboard
You will use Blackboard throughout the semester to submit assignments, access project instructions, and class announcements. It is your responsibility to confirm that an assignment has been submitted. The turnaround time for grading is a minimum of one week from the assignment due, so please make sure you are checking Blackboard to see if a grade was reported, and any feedback given. If you see a "0" reported in any grade column, it means that no assignment was submitted. When you post individual assignments to Blackboard, you will be able to see what your assignment grade is (and any comments I may provide) in the grade book, but keep in mind that several components of your final grade in the course are averaged, so Blackboard will not accurately represent your final grade in the course. To receive a more accurate reflection of your grade in the course, it is always best to check with me.

Grading Scale

A+ 97-100	B+ 87-89	C+ 77-79	D+ 67-69	F 59 & below
A 93-96	B 83-86	C 73-76	D 63-66	
A- 90-92	B- 80-82	C- 70-72	D- 60-62	

Email
Individual communication regarding the class will take place **through your SCSU email account**. Please make sure your account is functional and that you check it regularly, as I will send periodic reminders throughout the semester.

- Please make sure to include a subject in all emails (the subject line for emails to me, and to classmates, should include CMS 250).
- Make sure to address the recipient in a professional manner (i.e., Dear Derek, Dear Professor Taylor, etc.).
- Please do not use IM or text message abbreviations, as they are not appropriate for professional correspondence.
- Please be as clear and articulate as possible in all of your emails (check spelling and grammar). Conclude all emails with your name and contact information.
- Please be civil and respectful in all email communications.

If you have questions, comments, concerns, etc., please stop by during my office hours (see first page of syllabus). If these hours are not conducive to your schedule, I will try to schedule an appointment time that is mutually beneficial. Please feel free to contact me via email but keep in mind that I typically respond to email on weekdays between 8am and 4pm and will very rarely reply to your email after 4pm or over the weekend. Turnaround time can be up to 24 hours. If you email me after 4pm or over the weekend, do not expect an immediate reply.

Date	IN-CLASS	READING (read by assigned class meeting)	ONLINE/SCREENING (view by assigned class meeting)	DUE
Week 1 **T Aug. 25**	• Introduction to Course • Introduction to Horror • What is Horror?	→ Review Course Syllabus		
Week 2 **T Sep. 1**	• Beginnings of Horror • The Horror Genre	→ "Studying Horror Film: Introduction" by Bryan Turnock		**+ Writing Assignment: Personal Reflection on Fear in Film**
Week 3 **T Sep. 8**	• Classic Horror	→ "Dracula" (in *Projected Fears*) by Kendall R. Phillips	- *Dracula* (Tod Browning, 1931)	**+Reading/Screening Quiz #1**
Week 4 **T Sep. 15**	• Horror Breakthrough • Slasher Influences	→ "Psycho" (in *Projected Fears*) by Kendall R. Phillips	- *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960)	**+Reading/Screening Quiz #2**
Week 5 **T Sep. 22**	• Zombie Horror • Social Horror	→ "Night of the Living Dead" (in *Projected Fears*) by Kendall R. Phillips	- *Night of the Living Dead* (George Romero, 1968)	**+Reading/Screening Quiz #3** **+ Writing Assignment: Hitchcock's *Psycho* Trailer (Reflection & Analysis)**
Week 6 **T Sep. 29**	• 1973-1974: A Landmark Year in Horror • Satanic Panic & The Occult • Supernatural Horror	→ "The Exorcist and The Texas Chainsaw Massacre" (in *Projected Fears*) by Kendall R. Phillips	- *The Exorcist* (William Friedkin, 1973)	**+Reading/Screening Quiz #4**
Week 7 **T Oct. 6**	• 1973-1974: A Landmark Year in Horror (cont.) • Exploitation Horror • Rural Gothic	→ "The Exorcist and The Texas Chainsaw Massacre" (in *Projected Fears*) by Kendall R. Phillips	- *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (Tobe Hooper, 1974)	**+Reading/Screening Quiz #5**
Week 8 **T Oct. 13**	• Slasher Horror	→ "Halloween" (in *Projected Fears*) by Kendall R. Phillips	- *Halloween* (John Carpenter, 1978)	**+Reading/Screening Quiz #6**
Week 9 **T Oct. 20**	• Midterm Exam			**+ Midterm Exam**

Week 10 **T Oct. 27**	• Psychological Horror	→ "Comments on Culture: The Shining (1980): Director Stanley Kubrick" by M. Keith Booker	- *The Shining* (Stanley Kubrick, 1980)	**+Reading/Screening Quiz #7** **+ Writing Assignment: "The Final Girl"**
Week 11 **T Nov. 3**	• Hollywood Horror Film Project/Pitch	→ Discuss *Hollywood Horror Pitch Project*		
Week 12 **T Nov. 10**	• Found Footage Horror	→ "Found-Footage Horror and the Frame's Undoing" by Cecelia Sayad	- *Paranormal Activity* (Oren Peli, 2007)	**+Reading/Screening Quiz #8** **+ Horror Film Director Profile**
Week 13 **T Nov. 17**	• Re-definitions of Horror • New Social Horror	→ "Get Out" (in *Projected Fears*) by Kendall R. Phillips	- *Get Out* (Jordan Peele, 2017)	**+Reading/Screening Quiz #9**
Week 14 **T Nov. 24**	• Elevated Horror	→ "Horror After Elevated: A Study of the Film Style of Ari Aster" by Bohao Zeng	- *Hereditary* (Ari Aster, 2018)	**+Reading/Screening Quiz #10**
Week 15 **T Dec. 1**	• Collaboration Day • Work on Horror Film Project/Pitch During Class Time			
Week 16 **T. Dec. 8**	• Final Class Meeting • Hollywood Horror Film Project/Pitch • 12:45 pm – 2:45 pm			**+ Hollywood Horror Film Project/Pitch**

*****SYLLABUS/READINGS/FILM SCREENINGS/DUE DATES SUBJECT TO CHANGE AT DISCRETION OF INSTRUCTOR*****